

Date: May 4, 1983

Place: Foster-Jourdan Center

Interview with: Delbert Alexander

Interviewed by: G. Maddox

Comments: A very interesting man. I find many of his comments  
+++++ extremely insightful.

Q. Who are your parents and where were they from

A. My father was James Turner and my mother was Alice. My father was from Terre Haute, Ind. and my mother was from the Carolinas.

Q. What kind of jobs did they have?

A. My father was a domestic, a gardener and my mother stayed home.

Q. When were you born?

A. June 7, 1915.

Q. What was your job?

A. I was a project engineer for a coin operated machine firm. I designed pinball machines.

Q. Where did you go to school?

A. I graduated from Evanston High School in 1933. I first went to the Foster St. School and then to the Haven School.

Q. Were the schools integrated?

A. Yes. Both were about fifty-fifty race-wise.

Q. What did you do after you graduated?

A. I did odd jobs for the first three years, then in 1936 I got married.

Q. Was there much interaction between blacks and whites when you were in school?

A. Things were generally open. There weren't many fights. You have to remember that the economic balance here was so extreme then. Most of the whites here were upper class. There weren't many middle class people. Maybe 75% of the whites were really rich while maybe 8 of the 10% that was black were domestics. The rich people didn't have anything to do with the poor, black or white. It was not just a race thing, it was a class thing.

Q. Was there much political activity among blacks in Evanston then?

A. There was quite a political movement among blacks in the town then. Jourdan started it all. He was first elected in the early 1930's.

Q. What was he like?

A. He was a Harvard man. He had a degree in political science; He acted like a lightning rod for the movement.

Q. How do you think whites felt about his election?

A. They accepted it but you could tell they didn't like it. They did little things that you don't read about. They tried to keep the black population down through things like zoning codes, like they wouldn't allow apartment buildings on the west side. This is just my opinion, but I think they had realtors codes, still do today, and they constantly redrew the ward maps to cut up the black vote, especially after Jourdan won. The men in city hall didn't realize that people were aware of it, but they were.

Q. How did Jourdan get elected?

A. He grew more and more popular for about a year before he was elected. He managed the Regal Theatre in south Chicago.

Q. Did he try to organize blacks or did he just let them carry him in?

A. He just let his popularity grow until the election.

Q. And the white political leaders accepted him?

A. They pretty much did. He represented a particular section of the town, and he was popular. But I think he made the

Northwestern  
University



wrong choice.

Q. How?

A. He could have started at the bottom of the Chicago organization and worked his way up. He might have been something more then, but he married a prominent Evanston woman, so he came up here. He had andin.

Q. Let's talk some more about you. What kind of jobs have you held?

A. I worked at odd jobs for a while in the Depression, then I worked in a resturant at 612 Church St. for about three years. After that, I was a chauffeur for the next five years.

Q. For Who?

A. For Cyrus Garnett, the president of Prudential Life, just before they started using the rock. Then just before the war, I worked for A. M. Manquist, the man who started Who's Who.

Q. What did you do then?

A. I started working for a printing company in Wilmette. That's when I started making toys and games in my basement.

Q. What did you make?

A. I made a toy baseball game out of wood. I took a model to the Merchandise Mart and got a man who started making toys during the war interested in it. He, his son, and his partner had a plant in Grand Rapids and had made furniture before the war. During the war they started making toys out of wood. They liked my baseball game and a bowling game I had designed, but they needed capital to retool. While they were looking for capital, the owner told a friend about it, and the friend suggested that the bowling game would make a good coin operated game. So I isolated myself and came up with a design for an automatic scorer for the bowling game, the first ever. I got a patent for it, but the company couldn't raise the capital. When that folded, another company came out with a game similar to mine. I talked to a lawyer about a suit, but he said that it would cost almost as much to sue the company as I would eventually have gotten as a settlement.

Q. What happened then?

A. Well I stated working as an assitant foreman at a plant.

Q. Did you still work with games?

A. I still made games for things like P.T.A. carnivals and the like. One day I was coming out of the Post Office and slipped on the ice and broke my arm. While I was laid up, I read that a company was coming out with a baseball machine like the one that I had designed. I called the company, and the chief engineer had heard of me. He asked me to come show him my ideas. Well, he didn't like my ideas but he asked me to join a design team. Although the company wasn't interested in my baseball game, I still worked on it. During this time, I was putting four kids through college. My oldest son became a math teacher in Chigago. We designed a quite sophisticated type of the baseball game for the coin operated format. My son was able to get a Small Business Administration loan to start producing it. We got a plant set up for it, but we ran out of money when it came time to start producing it. I never had any problem with the SBA about the loans they gave me; the accounting was fine. But they wouldn't loan me the rest of the money I needed to start production.

Q. So that was the end of it?

A. No. A former executive for another company had become interested in the project, and he began acting as a sales rep. for us. Well, at a London show, he met a man with a factory in Wales, England. They could make the game, even





though they didn't know anything about baseball. He set it up for us to start production over there. I went over to Wales to help set up the plant. After a few months of nothing happening, I had to come home, and my son came over. He also kept getting the runaround. Finally, we asked the people at the plant why they weren't starting production. They said that our sales rep. owed them money from another venture, and that they wouldn't start production until they had enough money to cover themselves. I didn't have a quarter of a million dollars.

Q. So that ended it?

A. Well other companies were interested in it, until video games came out.

